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Bartholomew, Angela

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CHOOSE THE WORST EVIL

Between the University
of the Underground
and a State of Hostility

Angela M. Bartholomew

COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

In accordance with its radical pretences, the establishment of the University of the Underground brought trepidation. As a charitable foundation – and ‘post-graduate university’ – responsible for the Master Design of Experiences, the University of the Underground diverges in several notable ways from other post-graduate programmes at the Sandberg Instituut. Concerns were raised by staff and students alike at the Sandberg Instituut and the Rietveld Academie about the unusual circumstances it introduced. Primary among them was the

funding model of the programme and its implications.¹

With funding/founding partners such as WeTransfer, the University of the Underground relies heavily upon private sponsorship – with the intended goal of reaching an 80/20 split of private/public revenue. Additional unease was expressed in relation to the branding of the programme as subversive and counter-culture. Its use

of ‘radical terminology’ was found disconcerting for its clear appropriation of ‘counter-cultural capital’ to further the ambitions of its promoters – among them an unwieldy list of ‘partners in crime’ like Noam

Chomsky and Peaches.² Further, the opacity with which the programme presented the members of its governing

body, its funders, and its reasons for attaching itself to the Sandberg Instituut bred apprehension.³

Early in the spring of 2017, these concerns were voiced by students, tutors and heads of departments, resulting in a discussion with Jurgen Bey, the institute’s director. But it would not be until several months after the University of the Underground was fully up and running, on December 20 2017, that students and members of the faculty of the Sandberg Instituut were given the opportunity to discuss the programme with

its founder, Dr. Nelly Ben Hayoun, in the context of a moderated gathering. Prior to the meeting, issues to be brought to the table were submitted by the heads of departments, as well as a collective of students.⁴ In addition to the concerns outlined above, the matter of inconsistent student fees – offering free education only to the fifteen selected

¹ See: ‘UUGH! or: Issues regarding University of the Underground’, *Medium*, 17 September 2017. Accessed through: <https://medium.com/@uugh/issues-regarding-the-university-of-the-underground-and-the-sandberg-instituut-fe58dbbf889b> on 5 April 2018.

³ Initial protest by students and staff brought about several reforms: the University of the Underground was shifted into a newly established category as a ‘hosted programme’; it was given a temporary status (despite the 100-year rental contract obtained with the space under the nightclub De Marktkantine) with the intention to review the outcome of the ‘experiment’ after two years; and the name of the programme was more clearly stipulated as ‘Design of Experiences’ to better reflect the aims of the curriculum.

² Ibid.

⁴ These included issues raised in an email sent by several of Sandberg’s department directors (Jerszy Seymour, Annelys de Vet, Leopold Banchini, Maxine Kopsa, Tom Vandeputte) to director Jurgen Bey on May 17, 2017.

pupils of the privately-supported master programme – was put forth as highly problematic. Fundamental to all points of contention was a deeply felt unease among students and staff at the Sandberg about the future of arts education in the Netherlands. The necessity to safeguard the autonomy of educational imperatives in the academy, and the ethical position of the institute – which implicates the state and its role in supporting education – were at the fore of the matter.

Yet on this axiomatic issue, which lies at the root of the Sandberg Instituut's involvement with the University of the Underground, there was little discussion to be had. Ben Hayoun was given the floor to respond to criticisms lobbied against the University of the Underground. But rather than acknowledge any concrete objections, she launched into an idiosyncratic presentation on the history of design as a responsive field. She did so with a tone that was equally promotional as it was defensive, suggesting that the problem of free education – both financially and conceptually – is one that can be tackled by designers; a group of multi-disciplinary social dreamers developing solutions to meet the needs of the day. When a student from the United States was invited to tell the story of the massive debt he had incurred on the path to basic education in his home country, it was instrumentalised to plead the case that state-funded educational models were a failure. The contention that his situation, while far from unique, was not wholly translatable to the Dutch context, was disallowed through the repeated assertion that borders should not exist when it comes to the universal right to education. In so doing, Ben Hayoun managed to make the very real barriers to education that exist in the United States (and the United Kingdom) the justification for a new educational structure in the Netherlands.

- 5 While tuition fees were previously provided as a 'loan' by the Dutch government, which did not require repayment so long as the degree be completed within a stipulated period of time. The conditions of this 'loan' have steadily shifted, placing a larger burden on students. As of 2015, a decision was reached by the parliament to provide study fees strictly as a loan to be returned in full, regardless of the acquisition of the degree. By and large, this shift (a rather momentous one) was met with subdued protest, framed as it was as a necessary measure in times of 'financial crisis' and justified to students as a means to invest in the quality of education provided.

DISSENT AND DISTRUST

Contrary to what might be assumed by the premise of the University of the Underground, public education in the Netherlands has not (yet) fallen victim to the massive student debt conundrum that has already taken root in other countries. This is not to say that the Netherlands is by any means immune to the trend of distributing debt to those who pursue education. To the contrary, costs for secondary education have recently become the liability of students.⁵ Still, even in spite of pernicious austerity measures, study programmes

in the Netherlands remain heavily subsidised by the state. The annual costs for students from within the European Union who are studying at one of the Master of Fine Arts and Design programmes of the Sandberg Instituut was €2.556 in 2018, and €6.096,- for those from outside the European Union.⁶ Compare this to the costs of the Royal College of Art in London, which charges students from the European Union £9.500 per year (for now), and students

6 These costs are €500 higher than comparable tuition fees of other art academies in the Netherlands due to the Sandberg Instituut's designation as a 'small-scale' learning institute by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders. This accreditation facilitates the use of the €500 increase to offset the costs of maintaining smaller class sizes with attention to learning goals. For more information see: <https://sandberg.nl/apply>.

from outside the EU £28.400.⁷ An even more staggering comparison: an MA at the School of Arts Institute of Chicago costs students a whopping \$49.950 per year (among other obscure costs such as a 'technology fee').⁸

Considering these prohibitive costs in the U.S. and the U.K., the intention of the University of the Underground

to "radically rethink design education" and to "put pressure on for-profit educative structures and as a result propose alternatives to make education free to students" sounds pressing.⁹ However, in the Netherlands, where 'for-profit' educative structures do not play a prominent role, where art education was previously free and is still provided at low cost, who exactly is the target of this pressure? The Dutch state is, after all, currently propping up the University of the Underground by enabling it to establish a tax-free Public Benefit Organisation (ANBI¹⁰) – which allows its donors to deduct gifts and donations made to the University of the Underground as non-taxable income – whilst

9 Nelly Ben Hayoun, *Medium*, 19 September 2017, response to 'UUGH! or: Issues regarding University of the Underground', *Medium*, 17 September 2017. Accessed through: https://medium.com/@dr._nelly_ben_hayoun/dear-all-i-am-not-sure-where-you-got-any-of-this-information-from-9dbff8c39de8 on 2 May 2018.

10 ANBI: algemeen nut beogende instellingen.

supporting 50% of its operations and scholarships through 'governmental grants'.¹¹ The University of the Underground thus holds a highly privileged position. It condemns the failure of state-subsidised education while receiving subsidies; it procures free tuition

for its students through a charity system not available to other educational programmes while making use of the Sandberg's facilities. It stands to reason that Amsterdam has (at least in part) been selected as the location to launch the University of the Underground – which makes no secret of its intentions to spread to other cities – on account of these rather plush conditions.¹² Indeed,

7 Fees for the year 2018/2019. See: <https://www.rca.ac.uk/studying-at-the-rca/fees-funding/tuition-fees/>.

8 Fees for the year 2018/2019. See: <http://www.saic.edu/tuition/figure-your-costs/post-bacc-graduate-student-budget>.

11 The Creative Industry Fund primary among them. In time the University of the Underground aims to reduce public support to the aforementioned 20%.

12 The affordable costs of education in the Netherlands likely also play a role. The University of the Underground is, after all, predicated on its ability to raise sufficient funds to support the educational costs of students, and in the early phases of its development it is more feasible to attract private investors to cover low tuition fees.

Amsterdam has positioned itself over the past years as a hub for commercial industries because of its tax benefits, and many international companies and start-ups have settled here.

Particularly given the many ways in which the University of the Underground benefits from state support, Ben Hayoun's painting of the 'crisis of education' in broad strokes seems duplicitous. Her tendency to generalise about the failure of state-supported education is typical of her speaking engagements, but can likewise be seen in her writing on the University of the Underground. She cites, for example, the election of Donald Trump and the advancement of Theresa May post-Brexit as proof that "political systems have shown their limit."¹³ This she links with her call to "creative soldiers all around the world," to help in the production of "new forms of interactions with federal power structures."¹⁴ Which federal power

13 'Nelly Ben Hayoun Studios launches University of the Underground – a radical rethink of design education', *It's Nice That*, 2 February 2017. Accessed through: <https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/university-of-the-underground-launch-020217> on 6 April 2018.

14 Ibid.

structures, and to what ends is not important enough to clarify. Making such statements in the Netherlands suggests that the premise of the programme is out of touch with the context in which the University of the Underground is based – and dangerously so. It strikes those who would instead commit resources to turning back political developments of late as altogether accelerationist. What is it, after all, that has so warranted trust in private sponsorship while breeding dissent and distrust in government?

STATE OF HOSTILITY

This question touches upon a long-raging debate in the Netherlands regarding the responsibility of the state to support education and art. Dialectical positions on the relation of the state to the so-called free market can be observed in many domains. To put it generally, on one side the welfare state is painted in Thatcher-esque tones as a force holding back the progress of the individual, a corrupt conglomeration of bureaucrats grown too fat with the continuous flow of tax revenue. On the other, the welfare state is hailed as the defender of autonomy – as the distributor that ensures the continuation of social services that benefit the masses while preventing private interests from accumulating commonly-held resources. Neither characterisation can be said to be true to life,

but in the context of this discussion it is important to note that these depictions of the welfare state, and particularly the role of that state as it pertains to art and education, have historic roots and very real consequences.

This essay will continue to consider how support of the academies of art has waned with an embrace of neoliberal principles that began in the Netherlands in the 1980s.¹⁵ In so doing, it will consider the dilemma faced by art academies like the Sandberg Instituut, which are currently being pressured to make difficult choices regarding the future of their programmes and policies. What is the best strategy to continue to operate with the greatest possible autonomy in a system increasingly hostile to art education? Does the University of the Underground offer a potential model to engage private funders who are willing to fill the accounts left empty by the retreating welfare state?

¹⁵ While the so-called triumph of market-based capitalism over state-based socialism is frequently traced back to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the effects of the embrace of neoliberal ideology in the West were already fully underway by the late 1970s in the U.K. and U.S.A. While neoliberal ideology was already touted in the Netherlands as a way to escape the economic recession of the 1980s and had begun impacting policies with regards to state spending on art and education, it did not have a major impact on social housing and spatial development in the Netherlands until after the Purple Coalition under Prime Minister Wim Kok lost power, in 2002.

From the perspective of those involved in art education, the Dutch parliamentary elections of 2017 were not encouraging. Two of the parties involved in the eventual coalition, VVD and the CU expressed intentions to halve the number of art students enrolled in the Netherlands by cutting one hundred million euros from the art education budget.¹⁶ This stance, while extreme, did not come as a complete surprise. While the economic recession of 2008 is commonly referred to as a turning point for austerity measures, a neoliberal agenda targeting higher education and the humanities can be observed in the politics of the Netherlands since the 1980s.¹⁷

Many examples can be used to demonstrate policies that were typical of the time. It was, for example, the moment in which a centre-right government, with the CDA in power, sought an end to the individual support

¹⁷ Another frequently cited turning point is the assassination of Pim Fortuyn in 2002, which gave further traction to fear-based politics. See: Merijn Oudenampsen, *The conservative embrace of progressive values: On the intellectual origins of the swing to the right in Dutch politics*, dissertation, Tilburg University, 2018.

¹⁶ Edo Dijksterhuis, 'Kunst en verkiezingen: rechts wil bezuinigen, links repareren', *Het Parool*, 12 March 2017. Accessed through: <https://www.parool.nl/kunst-en-media/kunst-en-verkiezingen-rechts-wil-bezuinigen-links-repareren~a4472944/> on 7 April 2018. It is important to note that this proposal was generic and there are politicians in parliament who have also argued that it does not consider the actual economic impact of such cuts and how it might affect the sector (which will ultimately lead to higher costs in lost jobs than it will save the government in investments). Statistical research has shown that those who receive education in the sector are in fact no more at risk for joblessness than others, further supporting the argument that to cut funding to the arts is a symbolic act not based on present day economic factors.

of artists via the Beeldende Kunstenaars Regeling (BKR). The BKR awarded a salary to artists who had received

a degree from an accredited art academy in exchange for works of art, largely leaving it to the art academy and those educated by it to determine whether artists were deserving of financial sustenance to continue their work. This system was a validation of the academy, the instruction it provided, and its capacity to evaluate the success or failure of an artist.¹⁸ Yet by the 1980s, the BKR faced seemingly insurmountable problems. The number of artists making use of it had increased dramatically, as did the number of artworks accumulated by the programme. From 1983 onwards, the BKR was broken

18 Bram Ieven 'Destructive Construction: Democratization as a Vanishing Mediator in Current Dutch Art Policy', in: *Kunstlicht*, vol. 37, 2016: pp. 9-16; p. 12.

down in stages, eliminating recipients who did not meet increasingly strict parameters (thereby strategically dividing the base that would protest its eradication). 1986 marked its official end.¹⁹

19 Roel Pots, *Cultuur, koningen en democraten: overheid en cultuur in Nederland* (Culture, Kings, and Democrats: government and culture in the Netherlands), Amsterdam: Boom, 2000.

An extensive system of commissions and government acquisitions developed in its stead. In essence, the policy switched from one interested in supporting artists to one interested in supporting art. As Bram Ieven has argued, the expansion of the welfare state facilitated the reliance of artists upon it, and now, as it retreated, action would be taken to coerce artists to help in contributing to the agenda of the neoliberal state, which increasingly entailed filling gaps left in social sectors by waning subsidies.²⁰ As such an example shows, governmental support is far from uninterested. A return on investment is always expected. The very same, of course, is true of private investment. Private investors also expect returns – not the least of which are from the government, to whom they expect to pay less in taxes after having taken over its responsibilities. In such a situation, investors hold sway over an element they choose to support. In the case of the University of the Underground this entails influence over an educational institution and, as a double bonus, investors offer less in tax revenue to be distributed by the state. This we have seen before; it is a reincarnation of the American model, not a resistance to it.

20 Ieven (note 18).

SELLING SUBVERSION

The University of the Underground uses the visual codes of anti-establishment movements, while at the same time emphasising the importance of charisma, self-driven creativity, and free thinking. The vocabulary used suggests that the inherently subversive student (the creative soldier) is

being instrumentalised and incorporated within the – undefined – ‘federal power structures’. It purports to seek “a global engagement with society as a whole” while enabling students, armed with their training in design practice, to provide “toolkits for members of the public to actively participate in revealing power structures in institutions”, among other things.²¹ These lofty (and ambiguous) goals position the student designers as warriors in defence of ‘society’, an obtuse term even when not used in combination with ‘global engagement’. In reality art and design education cannot reasonably be said to ever have been representative of ‘society’, even while what is expected from ‘art’, and more so ‘design’, has increasingly catered to policies and funding schemes that shape its reception in terms of

21 University of the Underground Website, ‘About’: <http://universityofthe-underground.org/about>.

the artist or designer’s usefulness for, and impact on, society.²² The rhetoric and visual iconography employed by the University of the Underground is

22 See for example ‘The Art of Impact’, <https://theartofimpact.nl/>.

intended to convey “a sense of belonging to certain groups, to express different breeds of coolness”.²³ The application of terms such as ‘subversion’ and ‘underground’ to brand the programme’s identity, and the stated intent to train subversive thinking and practice, is exemplary of the reification of authentically subversive practices by the very capitalist system it posits to contest.²⁴

23 Silvio Lorusso, ‘The Designer Without Qualities – Notes On Ornamental Politics, Ironic Attachment, Bureaucraticity and Emotional Counterculture’, *Entreprecariat: The Institute of Network Cultures*, 19 January 2018. Accessed through: <http://network-cultures.org/entreprecariat/the-designer-without-qualities/> on 4 May 2018.

24 As I have noted elsewhere, Debord argues that to disempower subversive ideas “[t]he ruling ideology arranges the trivialization of subversive discoveries, and widely circulates them after sterilization”. Guy Debord, ‘Report on the Construction of Situations’, in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, Tom McDonough (ed.), Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002, p. 31.

For what, after all, at our current impasse could possibly be subversive about positioning private sponsorship as the answer, or even the partial solution, to a decline in the state’s support of education? Taking up arms as the defender of vulnerable individuals who would not otherwise be able to afford an art academy education, then using this position to provide free education for a select few (though it might better be called ‘sponsorship’) poses little challenge to the status quo. Such a strategy works instead to maintain competition. The Dutch government has extricated its support only to serve behind-the-scenes as producer, placing the obligation for the costs of artists’ education upon the shoulders of private sponsorship, which will, in turn, serve the interests of a neo-liberal state.²⁵ Those interests, in addition to pressuring artists

25 Op. cit. note 18 (leven).

to serve as social workers, push artistic practice to be more attenuated with the creative industry, to be market-driven, and self-sustaining. By all intents and purposes, a programme that reduces the expectation of state support to 20%, engages a wide range of international sponsors to contribute funds, outsources its production (to instructors outside the art academy), and links its students to a chain of already well-connected practitioners across a number of multi-disciplinary fields – all rooted squarely in the production of income – is the ultimate fantasy of the neo-liberal state. A series of large-scale advertisements for the success of austerity measures lie ahead, promoting the few, debt-free, internationally plugged-in young designers and their widely-acclaimed ‘subversive’ projects that demonstrate just how critical design can be.

THE WORST EVIL

Cuts made to education were precipitated by a state of emergency in the Netherlands, which sketched the economic situation in a hopeless freefall, falling behind competing states.²⁶ Despite a handful of sanctioned protests, reactionary moves made by the government were for the most part met with acquiescence. Change was deemed unavoidable and adhering to new policies made in response to (seemingly) inescapable declines in funding allowed educational institutions to mollify the devastation of such cuts. It allowed them to gradually instil the policies and culture of austerity from within, to facilitate compliance in the most painless manner possible. It is disconcerting to see the Sandberg Instituut experimenting with new potential models for education that involve outsourcing teaching responsibilities and corporate sponsorship, even from its position as hosting institution. While experimentation and risk-taking is sometimes necessary to consider which boundaries we in fact really wish to keep, experimenting with forms of privately funded education can have an adverse effect.

26 BAVO (Gideon Boie & Matthias Pauwels) (eds), *Enlightened Neoliberalism or: The Neoliberal City with Dutch Characteristics*, 2013, p. 21.

27 Eva Fotiadi, ‘From Autonomous to Generally Applicable Art’, *Kunstlicht*, vol. 38, 2017. Fotiadi uses the term ‘generally applicable art’. BAVO (Gideon Boie & Matthias Pauwels) (eds), *Cultural Activism Today: The Art of Over-Identification*, Rotterdam: Episode Publishers, 2007, p. 23. BAVO uses the term ‘Art Without Borders’ in reference to Doctors Without Borders, a corps of professionals that are ‘parachuted’ in from another place to help solve a local crisis.

In fact, the Sandberg’s decision to explore the possibilities presented by a privately-funded MA programme suggests similar motives as those that underlie a stream of artistic activity that has been referred to as ‘generally applicable art’, or ‘Art Without Borders’.²⁷ Such work “is not aimed at the deposition of the existing

order, but rather at ‘making the best of a bad situation’”.²⁸ These practices focus on incremental changes, adjusting to the circumstances with which they are faced, tailoring their projects to fit the most immediate needs of the individuals involved. This can be seen as a reasonable tactic; it is after all paralysing to consider taking on the structures of policy-making. Yet such an approach also explicitly rebukes a more radical position, one which would refuse to engage with the current circumstances. In considering that every concession to fill the gap of the welfare state, no matter how well-intentioned, serves to ensure that the current ideology continues to expand in influence, it can be argued that the best choice to be made between two evils, as reasoned by Karl Kraus, is “the worst evil”.²⁹

28 BAVO (note 26), p. 27.

29 Ibid., p. 28. BAVO cites this position of Karl Kraus in suggesting a way out of the conundrum facing artists who are at risk of maintaining the same very systemic conditions they critique.

The question thus returns: how should the Sandberg Instituut respond? Should those in leadership attempt to overcome strictures placed upon state subsidisation by taking money from private sponsorship (as selectively as possible)? Should they attempt to perform a sort of Robin Hood procedure, redistributing funds as fairly as they can? If this is to be the reality of the future, it is important to first consider that the ‘third way’ currently proposed as an alternative to public or private – a marriage between the two – does not necessarily grant additional autonomy. Instead, it may actually compound the disadvantages of both. For funds garnered by private sponsorship now work to ensure the same aims as those of the state, which has come to fully embrace its position in the business of global competition, profit-making, and resource extraction.

In such a situation what may in fact be subversive is to take the most inflexible position possible, to refuse to participate in a negotiation that would require exposing demands in an “economic negotiation” and thus create “a space in which the terms of this negotiation *itself* come to the fore and are called into question”.³⁰ This position would have consequences for the institute – business as usual may no longer be possible. This is a reality which may still grow and reduce the number of artists it can reasonably educate. But at the same time a hard stance might be the only way to slow the steam engine of privatisation delusively called progress. If institutions like Sandberg, which stress egalitarianism and non-hierarchical relations to such an extent that it runs through each layer of its practices, cannot refuse to bargain with parties that demonstrate indifference and animosity towards it, then who will?

30 BAVO (note 26), p. 135. BAVO offers a characterisation of Slavoj Žižek’s argument in *Organs without Bodies*, London & New York: Routledge, 2004.

Angela M. Bartholomew is a doctoral candidate and docent in art history at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and the University College Amsterdam. Her research examines artist's strategies devised to subvert power structures, considers how artistic practice shapes exhibition making, and in turn how exhibitions shape artistic practice. She writes on topics related to art in the 1980s and 1990s for exhibition catalogues and journals such as *Kunstlicht*, *OnCurating*, *Metropolis M*, and *Stedelijk Studies*.